

The Potentials of Ekeleke Dance Performance as a Tourist Attraction

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Abstract

Indigenous dance performances remain indispensable tools for tourism development. However, their potentials for tourist attraction have not been fully developed since their presentations dwell more on spectacular aspects of these performances. The aim of this study is to draw attention to the communicative potentials of indigenous performances using Ekeleke Dance of Ekwe, Imo state. The objective is to encourage practitioners to go beyond spectacle and explore the aesthetic and communicative elements of indigenous performance as a step towards increasing tourist attraction. Case study and content analysis approach of the qualitative research method are adopted for the realization of research objectives.

Keywords: Indigenous dance, Tourism development, Communication.

Introduction

The evolution of indigenous dance as an art form dates as far back as the emergence of man and the organized society. However, it attained the status of tourist attraction when practitioners started the revival, utilization and repackaging of traditional festivals, masquerade theatres and indigenous dances as tourist attractions. Indigenous dances like Ekeleke dance of Ekwe community in Imo state, Nigeria stand out as tourist attractions because they have both aesthetic and communicative elements for any tourist industry. Hence, these performances have potentials for projecting the norms and values of the community. Afam Emeka affirms that: "Indigenous dance as an art is interwoven around the fabrics of indigenous communities especially their socio-political, economic and religious experience" (34).

Indigenous dance in traditional African societies expresses the beliefs, attitudes, norms and values of a particular culture. Thus, most communities in Africa, especially Igboland do not dance just for the sake of dancing. This is without prejudice that there are spectacular dances that may not be rooted in functionality. Onwuekwe Agatha in agreement to this declares;

Indigenous dance can be an art, visual or recreation. It goes beyond the mere function movement of work or sport to become an experience that is pleasurable, exciting or aesthetically valuable. In doing so, it can also express emotions, moods, ideas, tell a story or portray political and social needs of a community (178).

Indigenous dance symbolizes social structure and traditional values of the people where it exists. It is used to praise, criticize and sensitize indigenous people on any existing issue such as rape, unwanted pregnancy and stealing. Alphonse Trevous-Dvople avers that "Indigenous dance in Africa is used as functional tool or expression. It is used in ritualistic purpose, aesthetic enjoyment, courtship, personal communication and cultural continuity" (1).

In Africa, each indigenous dance has a context, a story within the performance. It is the context that gives meaning to any indigenous dance, whether it is a ritual dance or ceremonial dance. The interpretative contextual essence of indigenous dances based on tourist development are very important because it guides the tourist on understanding of the tempos, the mood, images and metaphors in indigenous dance whenever it is performed.

Indigenous Dance and Tourism Development: A Critical Overview

Tourism development has become a major source of economic diversification for many countries, underpinning the service sector and forging effective backward and forward linkages with the rest of the economy, allowing new employment and income earning opportunities. Ayeni Dorcas states that; "Only developing countries with effective natural and man-made tourism supporting and enhancing infrastructure have been able to develop their tourism sector and seize the attendant advantages" (68). Tourism development can then be defined according to O.O Ovat (33) as 'all the activities associated with providing facilities for tourist in a destination, it also involves activities such as skill development, job and wealth creation.' In other words, development through tourism is commonly the world's leading category of international trade (Kings Paul 34). The effects of globalization on tourism development reach deeper into national economics, and global trade becomes more significant for both developing and developed countries. Penelope Urquhart asserts that; "The gravitating tend of tourism development refers to the increasing flow of goods, services, people and money across the national borders" (45), because of this, tourism development has aided in publicizing the inherent communicative potency in various indigenous

dance performances, trade, craftsmanship and art, thereby making foreign investors to have a strong communicative understanding into various indigenous forms of art. The focus of the Nigerian tourist industry must transcend historical and cultural sites to include indigenous performances like Ekeleke which is completely indigenous and a wonder of the world to a Western audience. Cross River State started this trend in the Calabar Carnival, and Abuja has also joined. There is need for the Imo State government to organize Imo indigenous performances and designate a market place for showcasing them.

Socio-Cultural Essence of Indigenous Dance towards Tourism Development

Indigenous dance is a cultural behaviour that is determined by the values, attitudes and beliefs of the people through the relationship between indigenous dance and other aspects of culture that is reciprocal which often contributes to the continuity and change of things in indigenous communities. Based on this, regard Judith Lynne Hanna observes that;

Indigenous dance is composed of purposeful, intentional, rhythmical and culturally patterned sequence of non-verbal body movements and gestures which are not ordinary but are motor activities, whose simple motions have inherent values in them. (67)

Indigenous dance is a social behaviour which reflects the relationships among individuals in groups and among groups themselves in a society. It has a powerful communicative potency that evoke associations about ideas, feelings and physical things, thereby giving them a communal origin irrespective of their creation, profession and religion. It is the communicative cum interpretative potency in our indigenous dance that attracts tourism development by aiding the tourist to understand the uniqueness form of the dance both in form, style and content.

Ekeleke Dance Of Ekwe Umundugba as a Tourism attraction.

Origin of the Dance

The origin of Ekeleke dance is very symbolic in Ekwe Umundugba, Imo State. The dance is believed to have emerged from women at early stage of the performance before it was adopted by the men in the community. The women in their aesthetic dressing, performed the dance in the village during special occasions and festivals. It was also believed that the beautiful nature of the dancer's costume while performing the dance tells more of the dancer's state of mind, emotions and mood while on stage. In line with this, so much emphasis is placed on each dancer's costume, make-up, props and carriage while performing on stage. This is why the dance is called Ekeleke meaning 'Dressing'. On the day of performance, the audience would come and watch the best dressed dancer and her carriage on stage, in doing so the communicative essence of dancers' movements is de-emphasized and so much attention is paid to their costumes. That is why, the dancers on their part place more emphasis on beautifying themselves as females in all forms and manners in order to achieve the required pictorial aesthetics and de-emphasize the potency of the dance movement. At a point, men from three communities; Umudidi, Ibeoma and Uburuekwu decided to take the dance beyond its mere aesthetic level, adopting it from the women and re-modifying it to suit both the social, political and religious situations of the community whenever the dance is performed.

The originality of the *Ekeleke* dance is profound but the men from these communities where it was adopted added elements like costumes, dance movement, dance props and sacredness to make it look more masculine, energetic and communicative in nature. The newly restructured *Ekeleke* dance by the men of these three communities in turn became the standard, a standard is extremely energetic for their women to perform. Till date, *Ekeleke* dance stands as a highly recognized dance in Ekwe community both in style, form and context.

Initiation ceremony

Ekeleke dance performance is supposedly an ageless unique dance amongst other dances in Ekwe community, because it is strictly for full initiates in the community 'That is, membership is only for people who are of age' and are ready to keep the rules and regulation guiding the dance. This dance is believed to be for men who are ready to defend and uphold the customs, traditions and moral values of Ekwe community. Before the initiation ceremony into Ekeleke dance, people who have declared interest to become members would visit the house of the lead dancer called Onyeisi Ekeleke, to be acquainted with the rules and regulations guiding the performance. Among the rules are as follows;

The initiates are expected to be freeborn members of the community. In Ekwe community, the ideology of being freeborn is for one not to be an outcast, because it is forbidden for an outcast to be initiated into the dance. Based on this, individuals to be initiated are referred to as free born people and will always receive blessings from their ancestors, who are believed to be partakers in the dance. The blessings which are metaphorical in nature always come in the form of favours, bountiful harvests and breakthroughs.

This dance is not an everyday performance rather it is done in June which is the period of the planting season in the community, whereby the indigenes make plea to their ancestors for a bountiful harvest.

The costumes for the dance are highly fortified for initiates only. It is believed that once a non-initiate touches the costume, he would lose consciousness for six months before series of purification rites would be performed for him to regain his consciousness.



Ekeleke dance costume

The dance performance based on its potency can only be taught by Onyeisi Ekeleke. Onyeisi Ekeleke (the lead dancer) is believed to have emerged from the lineage of Ekeleke lead dancers. It is believed that the family was handed the authority of choreographing the dance from the days of their grandfathers till date. Any non-member of this lineage who try to choreograph the dance would face the wrath of the gods.

When the rules and regulation guiding the dance are fully learnt by the initiates, then a date would be fixed for the full initiation. The ideal age for the initiation is 16 years and above. This is because in Ekwe community it is believed that youths of this age are still young, obedient, respectful and ready to learn and uphold their customs and traditions. Two things are very symbolic during the initiations which are; the time 8pm and the month which is June-July. June – July in Ekwe community is the planting season, the youths who are supposed to be initiated return home and help their parents in planting at their various farms during the planting season. By so doing, significantly, the youths are tested on their sense of hard work, obedience and the desire to provide and help their parents especially in their old age, when their strength will fail them. After the planting season, the next thing is the harvesting season. It is what was planted during the planting season that would be harvested and used for the initiation. The initiates would be informed about the necessary food items to bring during their initiation ceremony. The necessary items to be provided on the day of initiation include rice, akpu, ukwa, ten gallons of palm wine, a big he-goat, bottles of beer, kolanuts and hard drinks. The need for these food items is to present the initiates to the gods for cleansing and purification and to invite both the living and the dead for a great festivity after the initiation. It is significant to note that it is during the initiation that the gods dine and wine with the living. Another symbolic thing during the initiation is the time 8pm. The reason for time is for their fore-fathers that danced Ekeleke while they were alive to witness the initiation ceremony. The ancestral spirits symbolically are also believed to be initiating their own members who were not opportuned to be initiated when they were alive. The initiates are expected to arrive 30 minutes before the ideal time. The reason for 30 minutes before the time is to give the ancestral spirits who are initiates too, time to be fully prepared for the initiation. The initiates arrive in their simple and everyday wear. In their various bags is their dance costume called “Akwa Egwu Ekeleke”. They all assemble in front of the village square of Onyeisi Ekeleke, who prays for them and asks their ancestral spirits to protect and guide the newly initiates in upholding their custom and tradition. They would be informed that as they were being initiated, that the same initiation would be taking place in the land of the ancestral spirits. After this, the Onyeisi Ekeleke declares them full initiates, thereafter the drummers start drumming in jubilation while the initiates begin to dance to show their full joy in being initiated into “Ekeleke dance”. Those serving food commence serving immediately.



An initiate before initiation and after initiation

The Orchestra

The drummers of this great and ageless dance performance are merely men between the ages of 40-55 years. The reason for using the men between this age limit as drummers is because they are seen as custodians in drumming the beat of this great dance performance. Their drumming style is beyond mere drumming of art for art sake, rather it communicates the various moods and situations of things at the point the Ekeleke dancers are on stage. The essential instruments required for performance are three Ekwe, which vary in size but highly communicative and significant in nature: Ekwe okpo oku, Ekwe Nkwado and Ekwe Omume.

Ekwe Okpo Oku: This particular type of Ekwe is very symbolic in the dance performance. It is symbolic in the sense that it is seen as an instrument that summons the Ekeleke dancers to get ready for the performance. This is not just ordinary summon, but significantly, it reminds the dancers that they are about to perform before a live audience and their unseen ancestral fathers. Hence they should give in their best as dancers and forget about anything that will disturb them or make them not to perform well. The drummer in charge of Ekwe Okpo Oku beats the Ekwe continuously, but on a very slow beat. This continuous slow beating of Ekwe Okpo Oku helps the dancers get ready for the actual dance. Also, it reminds them that they are performers and they must do everything possible to entertain their audience who have travelled from far and near to watch the performance. On hearing this particular Ekwe Okpo Oku, the Ekeleke dancers motivate themselves for the great task ahead and reminds the audience that they should forget all their worries and come out in their numbers to watch this great performance.

Ekwe Nkwado: Ekwe Nkwado motivates both the dancers and the audience, by putting them in the right frame of mind both psychologically, socially and emotionally during the performance. It is believed in Ekwe community that while performing this movement, the dancer automatically transforms spiritually into the ancestral world while presenting his needs and demands to them. The use of this instrument helps the dancers at this point to free style their dance movements in various communicative forms. The communicative message in dance is fully interpreted or portrayed in the dancers' various semiotic body movements while responding to the sound of Ekwe Nkwado. The audience on their part show how happy they are watching the Ekeleke dance performance. They can express such feelings by responding to the beat of Ekwe Nkwado, by dancing to the rhythm of the instrument. The audience believe so much that by watching the dancers perform that all their worries would be settled and their various farm produces that year will be successful. The dancers also use Ekwe Nkwado to get ready for the ageless dance movement of Ekeleke dance performance which is strictly meant for full initiates.

Ekwe Omume: This instrument aids the dancers to display their individual abilities in Ekeleke dance movement. It is at this point that individual dancers show how skilled they are in performing the dance. The rhythmic sound of the instrument is always fast. The fastness of the beat symbolically portrays the moment of intercession of their ancestral fathers on the problems of the initiates. So that no other person except initiates is allowed to participate.

The dancer at this point dances to entertain the audience and to show skilled ability to dance comfortably on top of a well carved stick. This ability of the individual dancer to dance on top of the carved stick on a very high speed without falling from it makes him a master of the art. The high level of professionalism amongst the dancers while performing the dance movement is determined at this point. Good skilled dance movement from the dancer earns him a lot of nicknames such as; Onye nwe egwu {the owner of dance himself}, Nwoke ike {a strong man}, and ukwu agu {the lion's leg}. The decoration with palm fronds portrays them as full initiates, custodians of the ageless Ekeleke drumming and highly skilled persons in maintaining the cues of the three Ekwe drums. Till date, Ekwe as an instrument in Ekeleke, remains an indispensable tool in aiding the dancers during their performance.

The Audience

The audience are allowed to watch the performance irrespective of where they are from, as their presence motivates the dancers to perform more vigorously. The performance is open to foreigners who want to document the dance or carry out further research on it. It is on record that during the performance, a lot of people attend the festival to watch and appreciate the craftsmanship in the dancers dancing on carved sticks comfortably without falling. It is the interpretative aesthetics in the dance movement that attracts people from far and wide to return home and watch the performance. In fact, there is a general saying among the people in Ekwe community that “mgbe obula akoro mmadu maka egwu ekeleke nke o noghi mgbe egosiputara ya, ihe o putara bu na uto di n’egwu akwaala ya, ihe o na-anu bu akuko si n’aka fere aka” {whenever ekeleke dance is narrated to a person who was absent during the performance, it simply means he/she has really missed the sweetness of the dance; what he/she is hearing is a second hand story}.

The natives indigenes and non-natives who constitute the audience consciously or unconsciously make a theatre-in-the round while watching the performance. Their circular movements during the performance serve as the wall of the theatre, while centre of the arena serves as the performing stage for the Ekeleke dancers. Members of audience are allowed to take pictures of various performances, but as non-initiates, they are not allowed to be inside the centre where the performance is taking place. The reason for not allowing them to go close is because the initiates are fortified with charms so close contact with the audience might affect their charms. The aesthetic essence of the dance both in its style, form, costumes, performing space, dancers and drummers has succeeded in drawing more and more people to the performance venue every year. The core performance venue of the dance is in front of Onyeisi Ekele house because that was the first place the dance was performed.



The audience watching Ekeleke dance performance (onyeama 2012)



The ageless Drummers of Ekeleke dance and the symbolic ekwe (Onyeama, 2012)



The performance arena, full initiates and the Ekeleke dancer

Ekeleke Dance Movement

The communicative and symbolic idea about dance depends so much on the leg movements of dancers on stage when critically examined. The dancers known as ‘Ekeleke dancers’ use their various leg movements to interpret the social problems of the time. The dancers are seen as the communicating link between the ruling class and the ruled. The dance movements when interpreted semiotically can portray or pass across three symbolic messages to the audience if being watched beyond mere aesthetics. The three levels of the semiotics passed across by the dancers through their dance movements are as follows: when will it be better, it is already getting better and at last it is time to celebrate

When Will it be Better (Olee Mgbe O ga Adi Mma)

The above is a dance movement. The dance movement here is always in a very slow beat as if the dancer is weak, worried, confused or not in the mood of dancing at all. The dancer depicts these various states of uncertainty in his dance using a dull coloured costume, holds a black horse tail, a one side turned female-like carved face, a small hand fan which is symbolically believed the dancer would use to blow in breeze of new hope, survival and favours . The dancer also stands on a carved stick which is the tool for the dance, while he puts on a dull socks. The essence of the dull socks is to portray symbolically the different stages of unseen circumstance one passes through in life .The symbolic and communicative essence of all these when interpreted through the semiotic movement of the dancer portrays the level of uncertainty of some indigenes on their farm produce that year, the struggle of some indigenes to survive in their various sources of earning a living and also the cries of parents on almighty God to provide for their children and great grandchildren in all their struggles towards earning a living. All these are interpreted in the dancer’s, slow movement which he sustains for a long time and leaves, before another dancer who will pass another message will come into the arena with his dance movement semiotically interpreted too.



Olee mgbe o ga-a ka mma (When will it be better?)

It is Already Getting Better (O kawalari Mma)

In the above dance movement the dancer's movement is always on a fast note and the spectators on smiling faces unlike those in (when will it be better). The dance movement of the dancer here reassures the indigenes that no matter how bad the situation of things to them, they should always believe in God.



O kawala mma. (It is better!)

At last it is time to celebrate (Ugbua buzi oge inwe anuri)

The above dance style semiotically portrays the celebration mood of the indigenes after harvesting their bountiful farm produce. It is believed that almighty God really cared for them by giving them a bountiful harvest and in order to show appreciation during the period of this dance celebration, there is always much to drink and merry. The dance movement is not notated at this point; rather the free style of the dancer's movement is based on his strength and ability to follow the fast tempo of drums. They dance all to thank God and pleads with him to continue blessing them. Aside the various semiotic interpretations on the dance movements, the lead dancer or "Onyeisi Ekeleke" is seen as the best dancer. The Onyeisi Ekeleke is also believed to have been on tour in search of a dance for the community (Ekwe) until he saw the women performing the dance just for aesthetics only. So he pleaded with them to teach him the dance and its movement, and he was taught the dance and its movement in its simplest form, but he later transformed it into a more masculine and energetic dance movement. He also brought in some other tools for the dance movement such as; standing on well carved stick, masking of the face with white cloth, having various communicative carved female-like faces on the white cloth and use of various types of hand props. In spite of all these re-modifications in the dance, it still maintains its originality.



Ugbua buzie oge inwe anuri (It is now time to be joyous)

Benefits of Tourism Development in Rural Communities

Tourism gives room for employment. When young dancers in a theatre begin to get paid for their performances more potential youths with skills will seek 'employment' opportunities in the same dance groups as well. It will contribute in infrastructural development. It will open links between the foreign tourist and rural communities towards cultural exploitation. It will help in rural exposition of what tourism development is and it will help to boost the chosen community economic standard.

CONCLUSION

Tourism development has really helped in publicizing to the entire world, the sociological essence of indigenous dance performance based on its documentation, preservation and tourist attraction. The core interpretative analysis placed on indigenous dance performance aid in bringing to bare before tourist the in- depth socio-cultural factors surrounding the dance during its creation, this gives the tourist a more widened horizon in understanding the communicative interpretative potency of the dance beyond its yearly or annual performance. Tourism development on indigenous dance motivates the tourist to research more into the dance, commercialize the dance if possible or just document it for posterity sake. In conclusion, x-raying indigenous dance performance will aid in analyzing the performance towards achieving a sustainable tourist development.

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